

# Mary's Song

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Preacher: Emily MacArthur

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     thanks Sam for reading the passage so as Richard said my name's Emily and I'm very excited to be speaking to you about the story of Mary because back in June I was able to speak about the story of Rahab a woman another woman in Matthew's lineage of Christ and she played an active role in God's salvation plan and Mary of course is the last in that extraordinary lineage and in some ways I find Mary just as much a problematic figure as Rahab she is a woman that church history has reduced to a symbol of sexual purity in the same way that Rahab finds it hard to lose the label of prostitute Mary becomes the Virgin Mary even though she can only be described that right at the start of her biblical story and furthermore Mary of course has become an icon she is worshipped and venerated in many church traditions she is seen as a holy vessel a passive recipient of the holy child and I sometimes think that that feels to me as if her body is a bit objectified it feels like an idea dreamed up by someone with little practical understanding of childbirth and through this I think she can lose a bit of her humanity and I've always found her a hard biblical character to identify with but I think looking at the biblical story of Mary Jesus's mother which starts here in Luke's gospel it provides a picture of an ordinary young woman who chooses to actively participate in God's plan of salvation and because of that is called to an extraordinary act of service and Mary's prayer sometimes called Mary's song shows us that Mary has a voice her words her words aren't recorded in many of the gospels but when she speaks her words carry authority so I'm going to look at three ways in which we can learn from Mary's example and I'm going to be using three words beginning with the letter c see I'm learning so the first one is consent Mary says yes to God's plan courage Mary's active participation in God's plan requires courage Mary personally has a great deal to lose but her prayer shows she has a prophetic vision of God's mission and kingdom and commitment

Mary is not just for Christmas she commits to lifelong service she will follow Jesus she'll be right there at the foot of the cross she will be present in the resurrection garden so first of all Mary's consent Mary's prayer is evidence of a heart that delights in serving the Lord my spirit rejoices in God my saviour but I wanted to look back at the context provided by Gabriel's visit the annunciation because actually that passage tells us that Mary is greatly troubled at the angel's appearance and at his greeting and Gabriel notices this because he the first thing he says to her is to not be afraid and then he goes on to impart some fairly complex information about God's plan for Mary

I feel this is a bit like the kind of doctor's consultation where you go to and wish you'd either taken notes or brought someone along to translate afterwards but Mary manages to keep her head in this really overwhelming experience and she asks an astute question how will this be since I am a virgin of course Mary's virginity is important Luke is using these early chapters of his gospel to show us how the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in the birth of John the Baptist the prophet and Jesus the Messiah and King as that famous birth in Isaiah says therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and call him Emmanuel and without Mary stating her virginity we don't have the concept of the immaculate conception and the paternity of Jesus would be thrown into doubt but with all of these things notwithstanding

Mary's question is not a naive question I think of it as a very scientific question it is an important question for her personally as it pertains to her body and what will happen to it and we're told that Luke was a doctor by profession the book of Acts I think that is and I like to think he wouldn't have missed the significance of the question I wonder what Mary's thinking in this moment and we're not told what she is thinking I wonder if she's thinking of Hagar or Tamar or Bathsheba biblical women whose stories she would have known and some of the things that happens to them and God redeems these very messy biblical relationships but it's not how God chooses to operate this birth will not be tainted by human sin as John records at the start of his gospel this baby is not born by human decision or a husband's will but by God

Gabriel is not at all affronted by the question and he gives this answer the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you at this point I think I would have further questions but actually Mary is reassured this act will be by spirit and not by flesh and it is to this answer that Mary gives her consent may it be to me as you have said famous line and Mary's consent is important I think because God does not act without our yes God has given us free will we think our freedom is important to us it is more important I believe to God it comes at a great cost if you want to know how costly free will is then you can probably turn on the news to find out if you want to know how costly it is then look at the cross

[ 7:18 ] God has plans for us but we need to say yes you can go through the motions of being a Christian can turn up on Sundays read the Bible we can even speak with wisdom on spiritual matters but if we haven't said yes to God then we can't have an active part in his plan so don't let fear stop you from saying yes it is okay to ask questions God welcomes difficult questions he can handle them because he has good answers that's what I loved about the alpha course no question is out of bounds and recently in my devotionals I've been listening to the story of Moses Moses and the burning bush which I think if you look at it Moses gets at least four questions in and God very patiently answers them so Mary says yes in this moment to carrying and birthing God's child but she is also I think aware that she is saying yes to an eternal calling from now on all generations will call me blessed there is evidence in her prayer that she understands the magnitude of what she is agreeing to so I think that brings us nicely to the idea of Mary's courage and I'm sure we're all familiar with the personal courage of Mary by agreeing to carry God's child she risked the public disgrace of a pregnant but unmarried woman

Matthew records that Joseph considers divorcing her quietly which is meant to be the kinder option but I think that Mary's song or prayer shows that she has another kind of courage she has the courage to participate in the coming of a kingdom which will be radically different from the earthly one the oppressive state that she is living under Mary's prayer is constructed using these parallel couplets my soul glorifies the Lord my spirit rejoices in God my saviour and it gives the song its rhythm but textually I think it also encourages us to contrast and compare the different parts so the first five verses is Mary's personal praise to God my soul and my spirit she is humbled but also blessed and I think the second half takes a more prophetic turn it refers to God's provision of the Israelite people through their history and it also provides a glimpse of the type of kingdom that Jesus will bring about he has performed mighty deeds with his arm he has scattered those who are proud in his innermost thoughts he has brought down rulers from their thrones he has lifted up the humble he has filled the hungry with good things but he has sent the rich away empty it's an extraordinary song it talks of the promises of God and his blessings on the humble the hungry it talks of overpowered rulers and the rich being sent away hungry feels like a revolutionary song so dangerous that the church through its history has been more comfortable with it in Latin

Mary's courage is in her acceptance of a plan that threatens to overthrow her own life but also seeks an overthrow of the world that she knows sending the rich away with empty bellies is I wager not a message you will find in the John Lewis Christmas advert or any of the others how far away we seem for this at Christmas in a world that cares more about whether it has the best dressed Christmas table the most extravagant presents more perhaps than justice for corrupt rulers and provision for the poor it takes courage to do Christmas God's way and it might upset people Mary's song shows I believe that she foresees this kingdom and she accepts it she will be with Jesus at the foot of the cross after many of the disciples have fled and this brings us to Mary's commitment

Mary's yes is not just for Christmas she commits to life and like Rahab we don't know the rest of Mary's story in great detail but I was particularly struck by verse 48 of the prayer from now on all generations will call me blessed and we could interpret this as Mary saying that her work here is done she has been impregnated by the Holy Spirit and she will be remembered long after her death her legacy is secure I don't actually think that's what Mary is saying here I think she's saying that God's plan for her isn't just for the present it's an eternal plan God has been gracious to Mary and he will continue to be gracious to her so to illustrate this back in 2008

I was working at the Imperial War Museum and we were opening an exhibition marking 90 years since the end of the First World War and we were privileged to have two of the last surviving soldiers of the First World War there to open the exhibition and they spoke to the press and then afterwards when we were having lunch I asked one of them how the morning had been and he said to me I fought in the First World War for three months I was a teenager I've lived my whole life afterwards I'm in my 90s and now all anyone wants to talk to me about is those three months we're very good at this as humans we define ourselves and each other by our best historical moments at Christmas families come together and tell stories of each other's past misdemeanors it is funny and well intentioned but it can keep us stuck in a place where we no longer want to be this isn't how God thinks

[ 14 : 23 ] God has an eternal perspective God believes that your best years lie ahead of you no matter how old you are we are becoming more Christ-like God is getting us ready for eternity so Mary doesn't stay a virgin she has a life and ministry that stretches far beyond this moment Mary Mary doesn't feature very much in Jesus' ministry but she is there right at the start in the wedding at Cana and Mary is not nagging Jesus in this scene she knows that Jesus can help she's not asking him to find a late night Tesco Mary knows who Jesus is and what he can do she prophetically sees God's plan for him and she wants that plan to start now don't we all want that

I want it I want to see more of Jesus' plan and his kingdom right now Mary is intercessory and prophetic it's this passage that the Catholic Church gets the idea of Mary as an intercessor from and whereas in our tradition we don't believe we need Mary to intercede for us we can intercede for other people following this amazing example and Jesus isn't being rude to Mary when he addresses her as woman he is acknowledging her as the daughter of Eve her offspring will crush the head of the serpent and John gives the punchline of the wedding in Cana episode to the master of the banquet and he says right at the end about the wine most hosts serve the best wine first but you have saved the best wine to last the best is yet to come

Mary is mentioned again in John's gospel as being at the foot of the cross and it is there that Jesus asked John to take Mary into his home and look after her as his own mother Mary doesn't have an easy life she watches the brutal execution of her son and despite being a resurrection witness Mary is still bereaved by Jesus' death and must suffer loss when he departs from her her chapter as Jesus' earthly mother is at an end chronologically we last hear of Mary in Acts 1 as part of the group that gathers to pray after Jesus has been taken up to heaven they join together constantly in prayer along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers

I have a gripe about garages that have the sign no parking in constant use because they are not in constant use constant means to do something continually doesn't it without stopping or ceasing but Luke says that Mary here was in this group in constant prayer and there we have Mary praying constantly at the end of Jesus' earthly life just as she is praying so fervently at the beginning because Mary is a mighty woman of prayer I think she must be exhausted notwithstanding anything else she is a bereaved mother and yet she's praying for the biggest outpouring of the Holy Spirit in church history I have a difficult personal relationship with the season of

Advent I really want it to be a lovely time I want to or imagine myself reflectively reading an Advent study quietly preparing my heart for the arrival of Jesus but the reality is I am frazzled and crash into the start of December desperately trying to string a sentence together for many of you this has been a tough year and you are approaching Christmas with pain health struggles bereavement and loss believe God wants to minister to you by his Holy Spirit just as he reached out with compassion to Mary on the cross just as he sent the living power of his spirit to the disciples at Pentecost to commit to Jesus long term is to rely on his strength and his spirit so that we continue to believe that our best years can lie ahead of us so what can we learn from Mary's story

[ 19 : 45 ] Mary's consent have you said yes to God you cannot become a Christian through osmosis God invites us to be in a relationship with him and we get to choose freely he will never force us into it he needs our yes do you have the courage in this Christmas season to be an obedient servant of your heavenly king and not the earthly kingdom how can you respond to the call for justice in Mary's prayer we've got three weeks to go could we invite a vulnerable person to our Christmas meal on Saturday could you have mince pies with a lonely neighbour can you share a prepped Christmas sandwich with someone who is street homeless commitment are you in this for the long haul do you need this advent to recommit to following

Jesus are you exhausted by the journey and do you need to ask God to minister you today in order that he can equip you for the next stage so Mary's yes was not just for Christmas may it also be true of ours amen to get to Thank you.